

The ISFN Anthology is an eclectic collection of thought-provoking short stories, poems and essays from past, present and up-and-coming writers. The anthology spans a wide range of themes and styles. From a short about hippies huffing nitrous to the poetry of Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder, the reader is bound to find a surprise at every turn of the page.

In our first volume, we present: Evelyn N. Alfred, Kevin Brown, Michael Campagnoli, Charlotte Cunningham-McEachin, Matthew Dexter, Emily Dickinson, Henri Frédéric Amiel, Noam Gagliardi, Rachael Z. Ikins, Allen Kopp, Bruce Lader, John Lambremont Sr., Roger Pincus, Madame Roland, and Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder.

# ISFN Anthology #1

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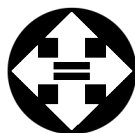


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Compiled and Edited By Noam Gagliardi

# ISFN ANTHOLOGY #1



ISFN

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## CONTENTS

1. <b>Matthew Dexter:</b> .....	009
i. Nitrous Alley	
2. <b>Evelyn N. Alfred:</b> .....	012
ii. Paper And Dreams	
3. <b>Charlotte Cunningham-McEachin:</b> .....	013
iii. Contract to Come Home Because I have Changed	
4. <b>Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder:</b> .....	020
iv. Farewell, Love	
v. Divers doth Use	
vi. Withouten many Words	
5. <b>Madame Roland:</b> .....	023
vii. On Happiness	
viii. Borrowed Ideas	
ix. Characters and Association	
6. <b>Roger Pincus:</b> .....	027
x. Match Point	
7. <b>John Lambremont, Sr.:</b> .....	035
xi. Drunkie	
xii. The Key	
xiii. Role Reversal	
8. <b>Emily Dickinson:</b> .....	044
xiii. 19	
xiv. 1510	

9. <b>Henri Frédéric Amiel:</b> .....	046
xiv. Three Excerpts	
10. <b>Kevin Brown:</b> .....	048
xv. Mounds like Brown Camel Humps	
11. <b>Rachael Z. Ikins:</b> .....	056
xvi. Fish Out of Water or the Dog-tooth Violet	
12. <b>Allen Kopp:</b> .....	058
xvii. Good Night, Sunny	
13. <b>Noam Gagliardi:</b> .....	066
xviii. Free Association at 2:20 am	
14. <b>Bruce Lader:</b> .....	077
xix. Fame	
xx. Empty	
xxi. Sunflower Fever	
xxii. In the World Series of Jazz	
15. <b>Michael Campagnoli:</b> .....	083
xxiii. The Ledges	
16. <b>The Authors</b> .....	103

## MATTHEW DEXTER

### *Nitrous Alley*

I'm that guy who sells nitrous oxide at Phish concerts. My tank is pure and my heart is good. My balloons are larger and cheaper than most other vendors on tour. After the show the hippies come by and suck some nitrous. The most enthusiastic buy about a dozen, walking away with balloons on a velvet leash, floating into the horizon like a low-level carnival employee.

"How many you want?" I ask. Some of them are teenagers. Most have long hair. Except for the frat boys—we never had bratty college kids with iPhones at Grateful Dead shows.

My buddy handles the tank, blows up the balloons. It takes about five seconds a piece. I take care of the money. We can sell hundreds in an hour. Sometimes the police come and empty our tank.

You'll see one person with a balloon...but if you keep walking you'll run across three more, then dozens—finally hundreds near the epicenter of the action. It's a good job and the kids respect me.

Only thing that gets me is when parents bring their kids. I have a boy and little girl myself—children envy

balloons. It's easy to mistake a hippie for a clown.

One July afternoon at Red Rocks, this woman walks up to us with two beautiful girls in a baby stroller.

"You really want to do that in front of your kids?" I asked.

"They've already seen the inside of the amphitheater." She hooked a half dozen balloons to the handle of her carriage, sucking the first one. She finished the balloon and asked for six more. She attached them to the carriage and collapsed on the grass. Her friends laughed, fanning her back toward consciousness. I saw she was fine, and went back to emptying the tank as quickly as possible, watching for undercover officers and bicycle cops.

My buddy was sweating and we had already made a few hundred bucks. Balloons were all around us; we couldn't see from the giant bubble they created, bobbing up and down, up and down. Everywhere you looked there were fingers around balloons in front of faces, surrounding us and closing in like the red walls of the cavern.

The money kept rolling in. The hiss of the helium tank made it sound like tree frogs were singing. It never stopped; the hissing went on for almost an hour. Someone tied dozens of balloons to the baby carriage



and the lady on the grass was the center of attention. She sucked another balloon and went into a seizure. Everybody huddled around her, it was too late. By the time I looked, the babies were floating in their carriage like a magic carpet above the Colorado horizon toward the top of the Joshua tree. It was too late—the tree frogs will have to take care of them.

**EVELYN N. ALFRED**

*Paper and Dreams*

The marionette is limp  
stowed away on the bottom shelf  
of the bookcase  
her name is Muse.

Befriended by dust bunnies  
Muse hasn't flapped her arms  
since winter  
the cantaloupe fringe on her dress  
has faded like paper and dreams.

Resting uncomfortably on a tome  
she is startled by her author's  
entrance  
the unfinished manuscript  
a bruise unable to be concealed  
with foundation.

Muse watches as her author  
avoids the manuscript  
and scans the bookshelf  
selecting the latest collection  
of Alice Walker's poems.

Flip, flip, flip  
the pages turn  
none of them written  
by her author.  
If she could  
Muse would shake her head  
shamefully.

## CHARLOTTE CUNNIGHAM-MCEACHIN

### Contract to Come Home Because I Have Changed:

I, \_\_\_\_\_, will obey directions at home.

And I will go into your room when you aren't around, and I will cut the cord on the paraffin bath I bought for you and your hurting hands, and I will sneak out at night when you think I am asleep, and I will go with friends who will give me things that make me not-think, and I will stand outside your door and move the doorknob up-and-down, up-and-down, and I will say, "I'm going to have to kill you now. I'm going to have to kill you. . . . .**NOW.**"

And I, \_\_\_\_\_, will go to Doctor Sanders every day after school on Wensdays.

And I will **kick** the dashboard of your car all-the-way there, and I will walk unwillingly-in, and you will sit quietly in the waiting-room that has the Umbrella-Stand by the door, the Woman-in-Pain on the wall, and you will pretend that I'm-not-There, and You're-not-There. And the radio will be talking to us in the background, but We-won't-Hear. You'll be looking at the out-dated issues of **Life**, thinking about how the doctor tells us that magazine-lives aren't **real**, and you'll be thinking-back to when I was little and I drew those pictures of when I didn't have a **face** or when I was a **freak** for him -- no, for **you** -- and when he asked you how they made you **feel**, you cried, you cried and wondered if the crying was made for him or for me.

And I, \_\_\_\_\_, will also stay in Scott Greening Drug Treatment.

After I have admitted that I am smoking and shooting and sniffing and tweaking and raving. And I **will**, one day, run-away from the drug treatment center because no one **likes** me there. And you will find a recent picture of me (the one where I am wearing the Red and Gold **Crown** you bought me for my 14-year-old birthday party), and you will go to Crown Center Shops because **you** know I like it there, and you will – – somehow, you'll **never** know how – – walk right-to-me even though there are thousands of people walking around you, and you will wonder why they don't know that you are looking for your son – – your **son** who **smokes** and **shoots** and **sniffs** and **tweaks** and **raves**.

And I, \_\_\_\_\_, will also willingly take my medicine, respidole and depacoat.

And you will be afraid to give me the medicine, so you will look them up and find out that one is an anti-psychotic and one is a mood-stabilizer, and you will wonder how the person who I was **then** is not the person who I am **now**, and you won't be able to **find** the **words**, but you'll **wonder** where you can **find** him **NOW**.

And I, \_\_\_\_\_, will also stay in school.

And you will come to my room every-morning, begging me to get out of bed because if I don't, you will **be-late** for work because you **have** to drive me 45 minutes there and 45 minutes back – – to the only school that will take me. And I will **lie** there and **laugh** while you **beg**.

And if I, \_\_\_\_\_, choose to break-these-rules, then I will-willingly go back to inpatient 2 Rivers Psychiatrick Hospital.

And while you are admitting me **again** I will **demand** that you **GO** to the car to **get me** a cigarette because I **HAVE** to have one **RIGHT-NOW** and if you **don't** get me one I will **tell** you that I will **break down** the walls and **bust** the windows and when you **give up** and **get me one** I will **smoke it** and **come back in** and I will **come to you** and I will **call** you names that you never thought -- **when I was your son** -- I could call you.

(Or-anyone.)



Please sign and date below:

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Me: \_\_\_\_\_

**YOU:** \_\_\_\_\_

## SIR THOMAS WYATT THE ELDER

### *Farewell, Love*

Farewell, Love, and all thy laws forever,  
Thy bated hooks shall tangle me no more;  
Senec and Plato call me from thy lore,  
To perfect wealth my wit for to endeavor.  
In blind error when I did persever,  
Thy sharp repulse, that pricketh aye so sore,  
And 'scape forth since liberty is lever.  
Therefore farewell, go trouble younger hearts,  
And in me claim no more authority;  
With idle youth go use thy property,  
And thereon spend thy many brittle darts.  
For hitherto though I have lost all my time,  
Me lusteth no longer rotten boughs to climb.

## SIR THOMAS WYATT THE ELDER

### *Divers doth Use*

Divers doth use, as I have heard and know,  
When that to change their ladies do begin,  
To mourn and wail, and never for to lin,  
Hoping thereby to pease their painful woe.  
And some there be, that when it chanceth so,  
That women change and hate where love hath been,  
They call them false and think with words to win  
The hearts of them which otherwhere doth grow.  
But as for me, though that by chance indeed  
Change hath outworn the favor that I had,  
I will not wail, lament, nor yet be sad,  
Or call her false that falsely did me feed,  
But let it pass, and think it is of kind  
That often change doth please a woman's mind.

## SIR THOMAS WYATT THE ELDER

*Madam, withouten many Words*

Madam, withouten many words,  
Once, I am sure, ye will or no.  
And if ye will, then leave your bordes,  
And use your wit and show it so.

And with a beck ye shall me call.  
And if of one that burneth alway  
Ye have any pity at all,  
Answer him fair with yea or nay.

If yea be, I shall be fain.  
If it be nay, friends as before.  
Ye shall another man obtain,  
And I mine own and your no more.

## MADAME ROLAND

### *Character and Association*

The commerce of the world affords us the facility of expressing ourselves readily and gracefully concerning the objects which present themselves; but it cannot contribute to improve the judgement, except of those who have theirs already formed.

Men, in general, lose part of their natural character by being in continual company, and we are never less ourselves than in living much with others. It is hardly anywhere but in solitude that we learn to think strongly; there it is that the mind is improved and enlightened, that ideas are extended and strengthened, that the feelings become refined and fortified, that the moral man acquires consistency, and assumes those qualities which he afterwards exercises among his fellows.

There are persons who cannot endure solitude; and it is so much worse for them; I know some of these; I see only the more reason to pity them.

We may cherish solitude without becoming misanthropes; none are less susceptible of attachment than dissipated people; feeling souls withdraw from the

crowd.

I am tired of those amphibious beings whom we cannot define, who do not know themselves, and whom we find everywhere dragging their incapacity; they make me impatient for retirement.

## MADAME ROLAND

### *Borrowed Ideas*

It is useful to borrow ideas from others; but the habit of consulting them, makes the mind contract a sort of sloth and dullness, which renders it incapable of ever determining by its own powers. Reading extends the judgement; to form it, is the province of meditation.

There are some people who are stupid from dint of science; so many names, facts, and experiences are heaped up in their head, that natural genius has been smothered by them; their conversation is a repository of what they have read, without ever being the expression of what they have reasoned upon; it does very well to make use of them as of a dictionary, but the thinking, contemplative being must be sought for elsewhere.

Too much reading overloads the memory, and dulls the imagination; meditation, on the contrary, carried to excess, heats, exalts, and leads to madness.

## MADAME ROLAND

### *On Happiness*

Happiness! . . . every one talks of it, few know it, and those who feel it, waste not their time in describing it. I, who am meditating on it, enjoy it not at this moment.

Feeling fills the soul; every enjoyment absorbs profound reflections; he, whose mind discusses matters coolly, is certainly not affected in a warm and touching manner. Such never wrote but from the want of something to divert his mind: how many other would have thought little had not active grief unfolded their faculties?



## ROGER PINCUS

### *Match Point*

Walter tried to loosen up by touching his toes twenty times and doing two sets of side stretches. But the muscles in his legs and arms felt brittle and cold, and fragile, like the icicles hanging from the front portico up north at their home in Massachusetts. Possibly the stiffness was caused by the wind. Another strong gust blew in off the ocean, chilling him even though the video screens back at the clubhouse claimed the temperature was eighty degrees.

Allison took the first set six-three as Walter tried to drag himself from sideline to sideline, his legs reluctant to obey his commands, his breath growing short. He hadn't slept well the previous night. The resort boasted that the mattresses in every suite had recently been replaced as part of a "room refreshing" initiative. But the mattress in their bedroom felt like it was stuffed with bricks. On their previous stays, the beds were always comfortable. He wondered what the resort had done with the old mattresses.

Allison had won an occasional set against him in the past but he couldn't recall ever losing to her by more

than two games. “Nicely done,” he told her at the courtside bench during the break. He turned his back to her and rifled through his canvas athletic bag, pretending to be distracted by his search for the towel he would use to wipe his face and neck. She thanked him for the compliment and said nothing more, sensing his frustration. He knew he was being childish, that he should be enjoying playing tennis with his wife. After all, Allison never seemed to mind that he, eighteen years her senior, always outplayed her. Or maybe his athletic prowess was *why* their age difference didn’t matter, he thought; why the romance between them was still strong, even now with his fifty-seventh birthday approaching.

He won the second set, six-two, mainly because of his serve, which hadn’t lost its sting over the years. But his victory left him hot, sweating, and breathing hard. When he hadn’t aced Allison, the points in set two had been decided only after rallies that she lengthened by relying on a powerful two-handed backhand.

She smashed a backhand drive past him to win a point. “When did you come up with that?” He stood at the net, grateful for a chance to catch his breath. “It’s impressive. Reminds me of Chris Evert.”

“Chris Evert . . . ” Allison repeated the name slowly

while approaching her side of the net.

“You know,” Walter said. “One of the greatest women’s tennis players of all time?”

“Oh, sure,” Allison said. “I think I saw a documentary about her on A&E.”

Very funny, Walter thought. “Did you learn the new backhand from the documentary?”

“Does it matter?” Allison smiled at him, teasing, looking warm and damp and happy.

“Just curious.” He was breathing more easily now.

“Ashley showed it to me during her last visit. I’ve been practicing it over and over with one of the ball machines at the club.”

He pictured his daughter, tall and slender like Allison, clandestinely tutoring his wife on tennis strokes, passing along tips she’d learned on her boarding school’s tennis team. The image of the two of them thwacking the ball back and forth in a joint effort to improve Allison’s play made him smile. “You and Ashley make quite the pair of conspirators,” he said.

But by the time the set was over, his smile was gone. A blanket of humid air and a dazzling sun had replaced the chilly breeze from earlier. He drank the last of his Gatorade greedily, not realizing he’d emptied the bottle until it yielded nothing but air.

“Those serves were *not* fair,” Allison said. “I just watched them go by to save my energy for this last set. This one is going to be *mine*.” She gently poked Walter’s stomach with her racket handle.

“We’ll see,” said Walter. His attempt to simulate a chuckle got caught in his parched throat. They changed ends and Walter found himself facing west.

The sun’s rays seemed aimed at Walter. He knew that the breeze that had deserted them must be blowing strong at the beach just a couple of hundred yards away, where sedentary guests sat on chairs topped by umbrellas. He imagined what it would be like to lounge on the beach, then evicted the thought from his mind. Repose didn’t suit him, or Allison, not yet. There would be plenty of time for that later, years later, when they would start growing old together.

He tugged the brim of his cap down but wasn’t able to shield his eyes from the light. He squinted and admonished himself for not reserving a court with a north-south alignment.

Allison began incorporating a high lob into her game. Normally, this would invite Walter to smash a return that resembled one of his serves. But today the lobs paid off: Walter lost several of them in the sun. He would see the ball at the apex of its trajectory but lose

it on the way down. The running was tiring Walter out.

Allison took the lead, five games to three, and the score in the set's ninth game reached fifteen-thirty, with Allison serving. Her first serve landed in the net; her second one arrived slightly to Walter's left. His backhand swing met the ball at his racket's sweet spot. He barely felt the impact. The ball flew over the net and landed near the back corner of the left service court. Allison didn't bother to chase it.

"Out!" she called.

Walter folded his arms and stood still, cocking his head to the left. "I think that one hit the sideline, honey."

"No way," Allison said, removing a fresh ball from one of the deep pockets in the front of her blue and white tennis top. She shook her head good-naturedly. "It landed in the alley. Thirty-thirty." From her spot behind the baseline, slightly to the right of the center mark, she extended her racket behind her and tossed the ball high in the air.

It didn't matter, Walter told himself. They were only playing a tennis game. *Playing a game*. It was a close match now; that should make playing even more interesting than usual. So what if she'd made a bad call and he'd lost a point?

Allison's serve landed smartly to his right. He stepped up and into it and his forehand return drove the ball down the line, deep into the backcourt. But Allison had anticipated where the return would go. She began moving to her backhand side before Walter completed his stroke. He thought about heading over to center court, figuring that Allison's quick feet might enable her to get to the ball soon enough to deliver a cross-court shot. But he decided against it: the placement, velocity and slice he had applied would make such a return too difficult.

But Allison got off a two-handed cross-court backhand shot that was perfect, and on its way to the corner of the backcourt, well to Walter's left. He would not be able to run the necessary distance before the ball bounced twice. And if it bounced twice, Allison would be serving match point.

He took three long strides and dove to his left, leaving his feet and fully extending his six-foot, two-inch frame. While in the air, he loosened his grip and let his racket slip forward, giving him an extra inch of reach. His backhand swing was short, but he connected with the ball, feebly, just below the racket's rim. The ball traveled softly through the air and Walter landed hard on the court. His left knee absorbed the brunt of the

impact and something inside it snapped. The ball landed in the net. Forty-thirty.

“Honey, are you okay?” Allison ran around the net and was at his side in an instant.

His knee felt like a dentist was drilling through it from the inside out. The pain grew sharper, shooting out at the joint as if trying to find an opening that would let it travel into the fresh air. But the pain couldn’t escape from Walter any more than he could break free of it. Instead, it resonated up and down his leg in insistent waves.

Walter stood, placing almost all his weight on his right foot. He noticed a few red drops on the clean Har-Tru playing surface.

“I’m fine,” he told Allison. “Just a scrape.”

“Are you sure?” She squatted by his knee and touched it gently. She began to caress it and to explore it for damage.

“Yes. I’m sure.” He stepped backward with his right foot and dragged his left leg free from Allison’s grasp. “Go ahead and serve,” he added. He tried to sound casual but his voice betrayed him, his words forced out through gritted teeth.

As she walked back to her end, Allison looked at him over her shoulder several times. He broke eye contact

and wiped his forehead with the front of his shirt. Her face knotted in worry.

She served, and the ball headed toward his forehand. He took one quick step with his right foot but when he followed it with his left, the stabbing in his knee told him to stop. The best he could do, as the pain took a decisive run at him, was stand on the court for one more moment and pose as the man who had skillfully returned countless serves like this one. The ball landed three feet to his right and bounced a second time just behind the baseline. His eyes welled up as the pain tore through him.



**JOHN LAMBREMONT, SR.**

*Drunkie*

My off-hand remark must have really cheesed her off that time, because when I turned from my window menu discussion with Big Dave, she was gone, around the corner, and vanished. I set off in chase, groaning internally, and asking myself, Why, because I wasn't even half drunk.

Rounding the corner, I ran down the hill, splashing through puddles, and trying to reach the cab stand before I slipped and busted my butt, but she was not in the cab line, and the subway entrance loomed across the street. I wouldn't find her, at least for now, and as I reached for my flask, I wondered if that was the last straw.

Big Dave sauntered up as I hit my whiskey, and he murmured in his deep basso profundo, "I've really got to get something to eat."  
I nodded, waving him off weakly, and he strolled away,

shaking his head.

I hit the flask again, trying to console myself, and humming an old soul song. Suddenly, a tall black guy about my age was next to me, singing the lyric, and I answered in kind in the call-and-response style. Soon we were chatting, and he told me about a cool record shop just up the block. I offered him my flask on the way over there, but he declined.

The record store was hip, with day-glow posters and grooving music, and I told him I'd been wanting for a long time to spend an afternoon listening to that old R&B stuff and getting very high. He said he was down, so we split for my apartment near the park.

"Nice pad," he said, and sat on the edge of the couch as I rewound a tape and gathered the fixings for a big reefer. His eyes wandered around the room, and he said, "Look, man, if you're sick, I know a guy . . ." I shook my head and told him I didn't use junk, but he licked his lips and said, "I know this place where . . ."

and I realized, staring hard at the dingy edges  
of his brown face, that he was a junkie on the make.

Mercifully, the tape broke in rewinding,  
and I seized this excuse for us to leave.  
Out in the hall, I said, "If I was on junk,  
I couldn't do this," and then I tap-danced down  
the stairwell, skittering out the front door  
and down the street, as I have no use  
for a junkie.

**JOHN LAMBREMONT, SR.**

*The key*

My wife has left me;  
I am bereft, an empty basket.  
I spend my day in non-stop sobs  
and piteous screams when I throw  
and break things.  
My sisters have come,  
but cannot console me.

My wife has taken  
up with an old college  
classmate, a widower  
doctor from Da Nang.  
I knew some day  
this would happen.

My sisters walk me down  
a dark corridor, where  
my predictable lament  
is for our dead mom.

We pass a wooden table;  
on it a lidded brass jar  
that starts to shake.

"Mom? Mom?" I query, and  
a thin mist seeps from the jar,  
forming a cloud. Inside is  
an adobe house with three windows,  
in them the faces of our mom  
and two cartoon pets; all are smiling.  
That's my mother in heaven,  
she can't help me.

The jar erupts, the lid flies,  
a pale plume rising, and a small  
white djinni appears. He marvels  
at the realness of his surroundings,  
and I clutch his chalky hand,  
opaque yet solid.

My older sister beseeches him;  
he bids me to attend, murmurs:  
"This is the Key." A screen glows before  
my eyes, brown and orange,

with medieval text about  
Kodiak bears.

I cry out my useless protest, but  
my younger sister wants to read it,  
she saw it on Discovery.

I claw the screen aside, but  
the djinni is gone, and I moan,  
resigned.

Now I see my life on the screen,  
a dated black-and-white  
sign-off signal from an old local  
station, cursed pelican in  
perpetual leer. My future  
is my past.

**JOHN LAMBREMONT, SR.**

*Role Reversal*

I'm awakened from my post-work nap by a rapping at my chamber door, and I'm irritated instantly, as the cleaning lady has left my office suite open, again. The cocky guy from the non-profit intervention outfit across the hall is grinning when I open up, his computer geek standing numbly at his side.

"John, I need to get to your computer, I left a couple of folders on there." I stare blankly as the words burn their way onto my brain-pan, then my blood pressure bottle-rockets and nearly pops. "You what?" I ask, and his grin droops a little. "These computers are password-protected, how did you get in?" I demand. He replies, "Our computers were on the fritz, and the cleaning lady left your front door open, so I thought you wouldn't mind. Jarrett knows the codes, since he replaced your server. You can e-mail them to me if you'd rather."

I brush by both of them, leaving my suite in search of the landlord, who's eating a T.V. dinner in the conference room. He gets an earful on the invasion of

my privacy and the jeopardy of my clients' confidentialities, and he nods solemnly in agreement, rising slowly to go down the hall to address the problem. On my way back to my office, I hear him speaking to the assembled intervention staff about the utter unacceptability of the situation, but I am not satisfied, and I burst in angrily to give them the real low-down.

I tell them that unlike their cushy, tax-supported jobs, I'm trying to run a business, and my business is the protection of people's rights and privacies. I'm shaking with anger as I let them know that despite my degrees and learned knowledge, I'm a reformed street punk that's had his share of street fights and seen his share of kills, and that if any of them sneaks into my office again or uses my computer without permission, someone's going to get a beating, or maybe strangled or a cap popped into his ass. I curse them profusely as I turn to Tonya, who has known me many years, for confirmation, and she nods quietly in affirmation.

I storm out to my car and light an angry cigarette, looking at my rear-view as I try to calm myself down. I see Jarrett and his boss outside engaging in a mock strangulation with a broken piece of hose. Then they glare over at me, and are no longer smiling as they re-enter the building



Two cigarettes later, back in my chambers,  
I hear someone rattling my re-locked front door.  
I am filled with an inexplicable sense of dread, and I find myself  
picking up the phone and dialing 0 for the operator. I ask her  
to call the police, and give her my name and address.  
She says she knows who I am, they have caller ID, and ques-  
tions  
whether this is an actual emergency. I tell her they're trying to  
get into my office, and she replies, "Maybe they need a lawyer,"  
and the line goes dead as the noises at the door get louder.

The back line on the phone lights up, and I pick it up quickly,  
praying it's the operator, but it's Tonya. "John, you've got an  
angry mob at your door. Try to run if you can. They took my .45

out of my purse, and have locked me in the supply closet.  
I'll try to call 911." Then she is gone.

I hear door glass breaking, and I lock my chamber door. I have  
my Kurz 9 mm and a big box of bullets in my desk drawer. I will  
barricade myself behind my aircraft carrier-sized desk, and, if I  
have to, I will pick them off one-by-one as they come through the  
door. I open my desk drawer, but the familiar space is empty,  
and I come to the horrified realization that someone has taken  
my pistol.

EMILY DICKINSON

19

A sepal, petal, and a thorn  
Upon a common summer's morn —  
A flask of Dew — A Bee or two —  
A Breeze — a caper in the trees —  
And I'm a Rose!

**EMILY DICKINSON**

*1510*

How happy is the little Stone  
That rambles in the Road alone,  
And doesn't care about Careers,  
And Exigencies never fears —  
Whose Coat of elemental Brown  
A passing Universe put on,  
And independent as the Sun  
Associates or glows alone,  
Fulfilling absolute Decree  
In casual simplicity

## HENRI FRÉDÉRIC AMIEL

Pure thought has scarcely any need of time, since it perceives the two ends of an idea almost at the same moment.

•

If the sailor did not carry with him his own tempera-  
ture, he could not go from the pole to the equator, and  
remain himself in spite of all. The man who has no ref-  
uge in himself, who lives, so to speak, in his front  
rooms, in the outer whirlwinds of things and opinions,  
is not properly a personality at all; he is not distinct,  
original, a cause—in a word, *some one*.

•

He who floats with the current, who does not guide  
himself according to higher principles, who has no  
ideal, no convictions,—such a man is a mere article of  
the world's furniture—a thing moved, instead of a liv-  
ing and moving being—an echo, not a voice. The man

who has no inner life is a slave to his surroundings, as the barometer is the obedient servant of the air at rest, and the weathercock the humble servant of the air in motion.

From: *A Soap Bubble Hanging from a Reed*

**KEVIN BROWN**

*Mounds like Brown Camel Humps*

The breasts under the black light of Melissa's Strip Joint were firm and brown. Inside there were no windows and no white light and the stage was between four sections of tables. In the back of the club was a black room and a curtain, made of glow-in-the-dark alien heads, hung across the open door for privacy. The Mexican and the girl with him sat at a table near the wall in the dark. It was smoky and the music was loud and their cab outside would be there for half an hour. After that, it would be gone, back to the city.

"What do you want to drink?" the girl asked. She'd taken off her sunglasses and hat.

"It's damn loud and smoky," the man said.

"I think I want a beer."

"Dos cervezas," the man yelled into the ear of a half-naked waitress.

"Big ones?" the waitress yelled back.

"Si, two of the biggest ones."

The woman brought two cans of beer and set out two napkins. She looked at the man and the girl. The girl was staring at a dancer on stage. The dancer was

on her knees, leaning straight back, and her chest was tan and her skin was smooth and flawless.

“They look like brown camel humps,” she said.

“I don’t know. In Mexico we don’t have camels,” the man wiped foam from his mustache.

“No, you don’t, do you.”

“Well, I guess we could have,” the man said. “Just because I haven’t seen one doesn’t mean one’s not there.”

The girl looked at the curtain. “What’s that say over the doorway?” she said. “Right there over that curtain?”

“Looks like it says ‘Heaven.’ It’s a room for, you know...?”

“Wanna try?”

The man called “Hey” to a topless girl walking by. She leaned over the table, her breasts brushing the tabletop.

“Yeah baby?”

“We want two lap dances.”

“With me?”

“Do you want it with her?”

“I don’t know,” the girl said. “Is she any good?”

“She looks good to me.”

“You want them with me?” asked the dancer.

“Yes, with you.”

After the dance they came out and sat back down at the table. The same stripper was still onstage. “That was wormwood,” the girl said.

“That’s how it usually goes.”

“Always,” said the girl. “Everything is wormwood. And she smelled like wormwood and cigarettes.”

“Here we go.”

“What?” the girl said. “I’m not doing anything. I was ha-ving a good time with my clothes all smelly and everything.”

“Well, let’s forget it and try and have some fun.”

“Fine. I’m trying. I told you that girl’s breasts looked like brown camel humps. Clever, huh?”

“Clever.”

“I wanted to try something new. That’s what this is all about, right—trying something new?”

“Si.”

The girl looked at the naked stripper spiraling ass-up down the pole.

“They’re beautiful breasts,” she said. “Really, they don’t look like brown camel humps. It’s just their color under the black light’s all.”

“Another cerveza?”

“Why not?”



The smell of exotic body oils and smoke was sticking to everything.

“Damn fine beer,” the man said.

“The best,” the girl said.

“Alls it is, is a simple operation, dig?” the man said.  
“Anymore, they’ve got it down to a science.”

The girl looked at a burned out match on the floor.

“I know you wouldn’t sweat it. There’s nothing to it. They go in right under the armpit.”

Silence.

“And you know I’ll be there in the lobby. The whole time. And if you don’t want to go under the armpit, they can cut right underneath. Natural as water.”

“Then what?”

“Then you’ll be fine. Just like we talked about.”

“You think?”

“That’s the only thing bothering us. It’s all we’re missing.”

The girl looked at the curtain, framed an alien head with her index finger and thumb, and squeezed them together.

“And you think everything will be fine? We can be happily ever after?”

“Shit, I know we will. You don’t have to sweat it. There’s lots of people does it.”

“I know,” said the girl. “And afterward they’re all happily ever after.”

“Well,” the man said, “don’t do it if you don’t want. Damn me to ask you if you don’t want it. But it’s really just a science.”

“And you really really want to?”

“I think it’d be hot. But I don’t want you to do it if you’re not sure.”

“And if I do do it, you’ll be happier and love me more times than now?”

“I love you many times now. You know that.”

“Of course. But, I do this, will it be like at first? I mean, if they were like brown camel humps you’d like it?”

“Love it. I love it now, but you know. You know how it is.”

“If I do it I won’t have to know how it is?”

“You won’t remember how it is because it’ll be done. Simple and scientific.”

“Fine. I’ll do it. I’ll probably die of some type of cancer anyway.”

“Que?”

“I don’t care what happens to me.”

“Jesus, I care what happens.”

“Whatever. But I don’t. So let’s do it and say fuck it

and be happily ever after.”

“Forget it if that’s how you think.”

The girl stood up and walked to the stage. Across, on the other side, were drunk men waving dollars at the dancer. Farther back was the liquor bar and DJ booth. Behind the booth, the curtain leading backstage shifted and opened and the girl saw all the naked dancers getting ready. The guy walked up beside her, a dollar stretched out.

“And I could have that,” the girl said, pointing. “And I could have that and every day more feeling would be lost.”

“Que?”

“I said I could have all that.”

“You can have it all.”

“No, I can’t.”

“You can have anything you want.”

“No, I can’t.”

“Go anywhere. Do anything.”

“No, I can’t. They aren’t mine anymore.”

“They’re yours.”

“No, they’re not. Once they put them in, yours are gone forever.”

“But they can take them back out.”

“Whatever.”

“Come sit back down,” he said. “And no more cervezas.”

“I can’t even feel it,” the girl said. “But I know what’ll happen.”

“Just don’t do things if you don’t want to is all—”

“Or if it’s not healthy,” she said. “No shit. I want another beer.”

“Fine. Just as long as you understand—”

“I understand,” she said. “Can’t you maybe keep quiet?”

They sat back down and the girl looked across the stage at the dancer burying a guy’s face in her chest. The man looked at the girl and at the dancer.

“You have to know,” he said, “I don’t want it if you don’t want it. I mean, I want it but I’m also good without it, just so’s you know.”

“Don’t you understand anything? We could do without them.”

“Of course we could. Look, what I want is you and that’s all. Simple and natural.”

“Yes, it is simple and natural and scientific.”

“Say what you want, but I know what I’m saying.”

“A favor?”

“Anything.”

“Please keep keep keep keep keep keep keep keep quiet.”

He shut up and looked at his watch. They had eight minutes before the cab was to take them to a hotel.

“Okay, I don’t want you to do it,” he said. “I don’t care about any of it.”

“I’ll call the security guard,” the girl said.

The waitress came by with two fresh beers and set them down on new napkins. “A cab driver outside said to tell you five minutes.”

“What?” the girl said.

“The cab. Cinco minutos.”

The girl smiled at the waitress and winked. The waitress moved on.

“I’d better pay the tab,” the man said. The girl smiled and winked at him.

He paid the tab and dropped a few dollars in the tip jar. He looked at the stage but the dancer was turned away so he couldn’t see. He sat down on a barstool and sipped his cerveza. He looked at all the guys around the stage, standing and whistling and weaving. He went back to the table and the girl was still smiling.

“Feel better?” he asked.

“I feel fine,” she said. “Worry free. Like a million fucking pesos.”

**RACHAEL Z. IKINS**

*Fish Out of Water or the Dog-tooth Violet*

On the outer edge of suburbia,  
where swamp meets asphalt,  
where grainy gravel spreads to touch  
the lip of lingering trillium carpet beneath  
thinner stands of beech and maple,

twin-homes or double-wides depending on  
your geography, patio homes, townhouses,  
all synonyms for “vinyl siding” surround me.

We blend in.

Honda-ed, hyundai-ed genericism spreads, one SUV  
per slotted, blacktop driveway.

Skimp of sky between our unit’s shoulder and next  
door’s garage wall, a finger-nail moon smiles.

Silver slice cold, carelessly adorned with  
constellations, a handful of stars she  
threw on as she dashed out the door.

Swamp next to Home Depot,  
peepers’ fragile flutter sighs, rises into clear sky.  
next, a late frost burns April apple blossoms,  
freezes bees to death. They cling inside

pink shrouds, yellow cargo-bundles, fuzzy  
against their bellies. Too cold to smell

sweet fragrance, apple-perfume tendrils. It would drift down  
the mountain, along the valley floor, hover over the stream,  
the muddy bank where deer impressed their perfect double-  
moon prints. If sun left the slightest hint of warmth behind the  
hill.

Here, we keep up with the Joneses, color-  
coordinated mulch, trim-colors range from subdued  
burgundy to appropriate teal, a few whites, a hunter gray,  
this house's flower beds an unnatural  
alkaline, rust, each perennial restrained, a perfect circle, equal spaces  
along the walkway, ornamental rocks mitered so.

Last Tuesday I was walking the dog,  
or maybe dragging out the recycling bin,  
one tongue rose from stony orange  
brulée, at my feet. I knelt, my cranky, cold knee.  
No doubt about it. Single mottled tongue, dogtooth  
violet— development, renovation, lot-  
clearing bulldozers, topsoil-loads dumped, survivor;  
licks the air, tells me of the woodland that stood here. Before  
vinyl.

**ALLEN KOPP**

*Good Night, Sunny*

My wife, Pseudophia, had become increasingly unable to function. She stayed in her darkened room all the time, lying in bed and staring at the wall screen. If I ever shut it off, she became horribly agitated. At times she projected herself into what was happening in the pictures and if it was turned off she believed she was dead. The only two things in her life that had any meaning for her anymore were the drugs she was addicted to for her illness and the wall screen.

I needed help with taking care of Pseudophia and managing the cooking and household chores, so I took a two-year option on a female domestic robot. When the two years are up, I will either own the robot outright or I can send her back to where she came from. I considered getting a combination domestic model and pleasure model, but I settled for the domestic model only.

After the robot had been with us for about two weeks, I went into the kitchen one evening when she was washing the dinner dishes.



“That was a wonderful dinner, Sunny,” I said, coming up behind her and taking her by surprise.

She turned and smiled at me. “So glad you liked it, sir.”

“How do you like being with us?” I asked.

“I like it fine, sir,” she said. “This is my first assignment.”

As she reached above her head to put the plates away, I noticed that she looked no different than she had looked in the morning; her blue-and-white check dress looked freshly laundered and she hadn’t a hair out of place.

“You look so real,” I said. “I can hardly believe you’re a robot.”

“We prefer the term ‘human simulant’,” she said.

“Of course. When I was growing up, I was afraid of the domestic robots. I thought they were monsters. They didn’t look human then. We had one that seemed to be about eight feet tall. Any time it came near me, I ran and hid.”

“Robot technology has come a long way since then, sir,” she said.

“Do you mind if I touch your cheek?”

“If you wish, sir.”

She held still as I ran the tips of my fingers along her cheek, down to her chin.

“You feel warm,” I said.

“My body temperature is ninety-eight point six degrees, sir.”

“Just like a living person.”

“Just as you say, sir.”

“Would you like to go for a little walk around the lake with me after you’re finished with the dishes?” I asked. “There’s a full moon tonight.”

“Now, you know I can’t do that, sir.” she said. “If I don’t get a full eight hours to recharge my energy supply, I won’t be able to perform effectively tomorrow.”

“Of course,” I said. I turned away and began rearranging the fruit in the bowl on the table.

“I sense that you’re lonely, sir,” she said.

“No, it’s not that. I just wanted to talk to you about my wife.”

“What about your wife, sir?”

“What do you think about her condition? Do you think the situation is hopeless?”

I forgot for the moment that robots don’t think; they can only reflect the thoughts of the humans they live among.

“It’s not for me to say, sir. Surely you’ve consulted with doctors. What do *they* say?”

“They say she has a rare degenerative disease that will become progressively worse until she dies.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that, sir. She’s so young and I can tell by looking at her that she was very beautiful before she became ill.”

“She used to be an excellent knife-thrower and she could walk up and down stairs on her hands. She had musical ability, too; she played show tunes on the musical saw.”

“You’re fortunate to have those memories of her, sir.”

I was feeling uncomfortable talking about Pseudophilia the way she used to be. I picked an apple from the bowl and took a bite, just to have something to do with my hands.

“Why don’t you go sit in your comfortable recline chair and I’ll bring you a drink that will relax you and help you to sleep?” Sunny said with a sympathetic smile.

I went into the other room and made myself comfortable, and in a few minutes she brought me a little glass of green liquid.

“What is it?” I asked as I took the glass from her.

“Just something I learned to make in school,” she said. “I don’t think you would have ever heard of it.”

I took a tiny taste of the green liquid and I immediately felt a warming sensation throughout my entire body.

“It tastes good,” I said.

“I was sure you would like it, sir,” she said.

She turned on some soothing music and straightened some objects on the desk and turned off all the lights in the room except for one. She turned and faced me with her hands clasped in front of her.

“If there’s nothing else you require, sir, I believe I’ll retire for the evening,” she said.

“Of course,” I said. “Good night, Sunny.”

“Good night, sir.”

I drank all the liquid in the glass and dozed for a while, listening to music that was, I believe, a string quartet by Schubert. After a few minutes I stood up and, instead of going up the stairs to my own bedroom as I had planned to do, I went into Pseudophia’s room and closed the door quietly.

Black-and-white images flickered on the wall screen, affording just enough light in the room for me to see Pseudophia sprawled on her back on the bed. She was a terrible sight with her mouth open and her hair in

wild disarray. Her eyes were wild and staring but unfocused. I knew she didn't see me and she knew nothing. It was becoming almost impossible for me to remember the person she had been.

I picked a pillow up from the bed and, without thinking about what I was about to do, put it over her face and leaned on it with both hands. She offered very little resistance—only a slight reflexive movement of the arms and legs—and soon I knew she was dead. When I pulled the pillow away from her face, she looked no different—the only difference was that she wasn't breathing.

I woke up at nine o'clock the next morning to the smell of food cooking. Feeling a stab of hunger, I got out of bed and put on my bathrobe and went downstairs.

Sunny was pouring a cup of tea for me when I went into the kitchen. I sat down at the table and picked up the morning paper.

"Breakfast is nearly ready," she said as she placed the cup of tea at my elbow with a smile.

I unfolded the paper, took a drink of the scalding tea and watched Sunny as she walked across the room. She looked radiant in a yellow pinafore with a white blouse and a yellow ribbon in her white-blonde hair. I couldn't

help noticing that her lips were very red and her cheeks looked flushed.

“You look like a ray of sunshine this morning,” I said as she set a plate of food before me.

“You’re too kind,” she said with a becoming blush.

“Did you have a good rest?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Most restful. I was up early this morning, though. The undertaker’s assistants came and took away poor Pseudophia’s body before daylight.”

“I didn’t hear anything,” I said.

“I didn’t want to wake you. I took care of everything. They wanted your signature on a release form, but I signed your name for you. The man said he thought that would be all right. I hope I did the right thing.”

“Of course,” I said.

“If you have everything you need for the moment, sir, I’ll just go upstairs and tidy up.”

“There’s just one thing,” I said.

“What is it?” she asked.

“What was in that drink you gave me last night?”

“Nothing special, sir. Just a drink.”

“That will be all for now,” I said with a grateful nod of my head.

“And if I may say so, sir?” she said as she turned to leave to room.

“Yes?”

“I think your life is going to be very happy and very bright from now on.”

I heard her footsteps on the stairs as I picked up the fork and began eating my breakfast.

NOAM GAGLIARDI

*Free Association at 2:20 am*

A translucent sheet of dusty light bathes him as he stares out the window.

As he sits by the window  
and stares.

This story will be about nothing. Nothing will happen.

I want you to understand that before you waste your time.

It's the sort of nothing I write about at 2:20 AM when I feel like nothing ever happens. Stories about how *he* (unnamed and vague) sits by *the window* and how a *translucent sheet of dusty light bathes him*.

... I don't know what it means,  
but it sounds like a good place to start ...

A translucent sheet of dusty light  
*bathes him*.

Bathes him like a

I'll give him a name. I'm going to name him *Jim*.

Or *Bob* or *Charlie*, or anything else easy to remember.

Bob is good. I'll name him Bob. Yes, *Bob*. Because I'm that lazy: lazy enough to name him Bob (and not that it's an excuse, but there really are people named Bob. Did you know that? Did you know that there are



*real Bobs* out there? Living, breathing Bobs who are much more than the invention of a lazy author who can't think of a better name? — I'm sure you've even met some).

Ultimately, it doesn't really

His name is Bob.

Let's make something happen.

I'll make the roof *cave in* on him: Let's *kill* Bob! I'll make him *die* and *bleed*! I'll *kill* the main character! I'll do it, watch me!

Don't worry, it's symbolic.

People like symbolism.

When it's not confusing.

People don't like to be confused.

I'm always confused.

I don't like people.

People confuse me.

Bob sits by the window and stares out the window and a *translucent sheet of dusty light* bathes him, warmly like a, bathing bath of, a warm, translucent, dusty sheet of an, almost not there, redolent of, memories of, as if almost barely,

That's what this story is about.

Certainly not about what happens next, which is nothing, only solemnly. The sort of solemn nothing that

makes you think about everything. Except for Bob; he's not thinking about that.

(there's also a tree that Bob sees through the window that brings to his memory memories of childhood or youth and perhaps thoughts about the inescapability of (from?) time which I, as the author, have made the choice of not mentioning: that is all subtext—it's not written but it's *there*: which is why, you see, you, as the reader, sensed in Bob that ineffable sense of yearning, yearning for a past that perhaps never existed.— The tree is an embodiment of all that, and so much more: It is a fig tree. I've never seen a fig tree myself but it sounds like the perfect tree for nostalgia.)

Bob's boring.

I'll get rid of Bob. Just like that. I can do it if I want. You haven't even read this and I'm already writing it. There's nothing you can do.

And the chair he sits on. I'll get rid of it too (*her*, in Spanish: more subtext that got lost in the original but will surely become evident in the translation).

If I keep the chair it'll remind me of Bob and I'll start to miss him.

Let's get rid of that window too.

Gone — *poof* — Just like that. Just like a. Just like Bob: Bob and the chair and the window and the trans-

lucent sheet of warmly bathing dusty light and Bob's yearning for memories about fig trees and youth: they are all gone. And now not only is the story about nothing, but also there is nothing for something to happen to.

Look.

You looked.

You looked at the word look.

Look is a beautiful word by itself.

Look.

I type it and you look at it.

You are reading what you are doing and it's telling you  
to do what you had to do to read it.



Look.

I think I'm going to bring back Bob.

And the chair.

And the window.

The story ends right before something spectacular  
and unexpected happens.

**BRUCE LADER**

*Fame*\*

A kindergarten girl gives lessons in it,  
knows that a hot pink bikini with shades  
is the point at pool parties  
where she wins gold in every race.

She *invented* leisure,  
a dance and swim instructor  
with a cake guaranteed to make the crowd  
do her bidding.

When she strolls, servants fight to carry umbrellas,  
bring lotion, lemonade, strawberry milk  
to her chaise longue.

Paparazzi die for close-ups,  
Oprah, Leno, and Riki,  
leads on her next movie.

The chauffeur, a boyfriend,  
speeds to Sunset Beach,  
grovels to have the honor  
of polishing her exquisite  
toenails in time for ballet.

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\* Reprinted from *Discovering Mortality*, March Street Press, 2005.

**BRUCE LADER**

*Sunflower Fever*\*

She planted a variety of registers:  
tenors and baritones by windows,  
altos and sopranos as you enter and leave.  
Swinging in and out of radiant mouths,  
bees rollick a razzmatazz of notes.

Combos she painted on canvas  
blaze in the livingroom. Stems  
like praying mantises and beanstalks  
trellis to grassy cloudswirls,  
lemon-orange rays flare auras  
of banana fingers on fire, unwind

riffs of golden birds . . . .

Designs on fruit bowl and thermometer,  
candleholder, even the oven gloves  
and coffee mug sizzle sultry motif.  
*Summertime* solos of Coltrane and Pepper  
soaring out of another world  
with cadenzas steamy enough  
to get eggs cooking like flying saucers  
don't send her as far as the rays  
in a seed of one sunflower.

She would dance their light forever,  
down to the honeycomb  
of an ear of corn.

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\* Reprinted from *Discovering Mortality*, March Street Press, 2005.

**BRUCE LADER**

*Empty\**

From Diamond Head haloed with contrails  
to Honolulu, valorized hotels,  
regimented as gravestones,  
preempt the splaying fingers of surf.  
Rest assured, however, the animals  
are well preserved in their zoo.

We shuttle to malls  
that slink the waterfront  
with collateral condos  
colonizing faster than coral,  
view the USS Arizona, a hecatomb  
for men uniformed in death.  
Defeated as an island divested of wilderness,  
the hull flags its life blood of oil  
into azure reef,  
angelfish haunt the breached turrets.

Sightseers decorated with plumeria  
pay respect, browse souvenir newspapers  
of the sacrifice. At eighteen-minute intervals,  
a military filmloop salvages  
a nutshell in the Memorial Theater,  
takes the endless roll call  
of soldiers who no longer obey.

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\* Reprinted from *Discovering Mortality*, March Street Press, 2005.

**BRUCE LADER**

*In the World Series of Jazz\**

The pitcher walks straight ahead to the mound,  
taps his foot in front of the stand,  
licks the reed a taste or two  
looks in for a sign and  
before breathing a sound  
lets the rhythm grab him,  
gets into a groove.

The monster in the lineup  
points the club, ready to swing the charts  
like Bechet, Prez, and Benny,  
or hard bop the ball out of the park  
like Bird, sensing vibes the hurler phrases  
from his medley of instant surprises

but the dot blows by, a goose egg of smoke  
burning the catcher's mitt,  
and then a Kansas City slider  
side-slips the plate, explodes runs of blues.

The joint of eighty thousand plus  
jumps like grasshoppers in a field of butterflies,  
logic laid out,  
as the cat tempts a half-speed change,  
a curve bridged above his wheelhouse  
like a slow boat to China, but the batter,  
cool as Monk, Gerry, and Chet,  
doesn't chase the quote.

The players are off their benches  
as the southpaw winds, spins loose  
a dexterous swallow of joy, the agile  
turnaround of a tune  
to take us out.

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\* Reprinted from *Discovering Mortality*, March Street Press, 2005.



## MICHAEL CAMPAGNOLI

### *The Ledges\**

Novitsky, I knew from the Royal. He was the one that got me the job at Tallpines when Lily was pregnant with Ben. So I owed him. The others I didn't know. I knew of them, but didn't know them, if you get what I mean. They'd been drinking all morning and needed someone to drive. Novitsky tossed me the keys.

"This is Dickie Longpants," he said.

In the car was Jack Bowman and David Coombs.

Jack nodded. Maybe he smiled. He had very black hair and blue eyes. Coombs ignored me. He was sitting in back, fishing a stubby finger in an empty pack of Marlboros. Looked like a hedgehog.

"Where to?" I asked.

"Does he know?" Coombs asked Novitsky .

"Yeah, yeah," Novitsky mumbled, "I told 'em."

"Drive to Randall's," Coombs grunted.

Randall was Randall Lynn. He was one of them. They all knew each other since they were kids. When we got there, Jack and David went in.

"What's up?" I asked Novitsky.

"Nothing," he answered.

Novitsky was big, maybe six-four, filled the back seat like an over-sized sack of potatoes. But bovine. A lummoX. He slouched down, took a swig off an empty beer bottle. "Don't worry about it. They're just letting off steam."

Ten minutes later, the door to Randall's trailer opened and the three came out.

I didn't recognize Randall at first. Standing between Jack and David, he looked like a little boy. All white and hollow, shivering in the cold. A face coiled between snarl and wince. He opened and closed his hands. He wore a torn grey sweatshirt and hood with a blaze-orange vest. When he got in the car, you could see he was sweating. I realized then that I spent a weekend with him in the drunk tank up in Waldo County. He was always bumming cigarettes. I wondered if he remembered. They put him in back with Novitsky and Coombs.

"Where we going?" Randall asked.

"Where you wanna go?" David answered.

"How bout Fahy's?"

"Hear that, Jack, he wants to go to Fahy's."

"Smart," Jack said. He was sitting in front.

"Yeah, a regular genius," David added. "Genius," he repeated and elbowed Randall hard. "You really wanna

go to Fahy's, genius?"

"Uh--I don't know."

"Jesus," Jack said and grinned. Jack had an extra tooth on top. On the side. When he smiled, it looked crazy like a fang. He leaned his head against the window and looked out.

It was around three-thirty. Already getting dark. A thin layer of snow covered the ground. The clouds were low. The air warm and damp. The road was empty.

"Yeah, a regular *genius*," David said, looking out at the dingy snow. "I guess you got all the angles figured, don't you, *genius*?"

Genius looked away.

"Memory D'll worry if I'm gone," he said.

David smirked.

"Drive down by the water," he told me.

So I drove.

The car was a big blue Oldsmobile. Bloated and all beat-up. It had huge fins and re-tread tires. Like something out of *Road Warrior*. "Charley Tuna" they called it. The back seat was ankle-deep in Sam Adams. When there wasn't any left, Novitsky revealed a bottle of peppermint schnapps.

"What kind of faggot drinks peppermint schnapps?"

Coombs asked.

“The kind that humps you up the ass,” Novitsky answered.

I figured it was better just to keep my mouth shut.

I drove to Spruce Head, across from Rackcliff Island. The summer before, I’d clammed there with my good friend Charley Dje’kwadis. “Charley Daylight,” we called him. There was a place called Miller’s out on the point that always had cold bottles of beer in a barrel of ice. But Miller’s was closed on account of the holiday.

“Boogerballs,” Jack said and drained the last of the schnapps. He bounced the bottle off a stop sign. “Let’s get out of here,” he told me.

I gunned the engine and we fishtailed down the road.

It was then that Novitsky reached down and pulled a lunchbox from under the front seat. A kid’s lunchbox with stickers: Big Bird, Barney, Power Rangers, the Road Runner. He opened it.

“Gone!” he cried and turned toward Coombs.

“What?” Coombs asked.

“The ice!” Novitsky answered.

Coombs ignored him.

“You’re joking, right?”

Coombs grabbed the empty box, turned it upside

down and shook.

“Gone,” he agreed and handed it back.

“Who took it?” Novitsky demanded.

Coombs stared straight ahead.

Six tabs of crystalized methamphetamine. Ready to smoke. “Ice,” they called it.

“It was *mine*. I didn’t even get none.”

“Stop bitchin’,” Coombs told him.

“It ain’t fair,” Novitsky blubbered. “Give it back!”

Jack turned suddenly. He lounged a big arm over the back of the seat. Looked right at Novitsky and smiled. No teeth or lips, just a crooked line, almost a leer. Novitsky stared back. Red-pumped with anger, he tried to meet Jack’s glare. It didn’t last long. Jack smirked. The sweatshirt under his black jacket had a human skull. The word POISON beneath it. An announcement of self.

Novitsky swallowed hard and winced. He turned toward the window.

“It was mine,” he pouted.



Jack was born “noname” Brochu. His mother, Kayann, slept around a lot. When she got drunk, she’d leave him and his sister, Memory D, with neighbors.

“I’ll be back in an hour,” she’d say, then not show up for days. Once she was gone for almost two years. Sober she was kind, even timid. A ragged mass of straight black hair. Acnescarred skin. Mouth thin and narrow. A purple gash. Drunk, she was loud, easily suggestible. She did 6 months in Knox County for driving the get-away car when her boyfriend held up the Gulf station in Belfast. He threatened the French boy watching the pumps with a coke bottle. The coke bottle was full. He almost beat the brains out of the poor kid. Kay-ann turned State’s evidence because the French kid, who could hardly remember his name, remembered her. Like two different people she was, sober and drunk. Jack loved the one, hated the other.

Snapshot of a Summer’s Day: Twilight. A parting view. Jack is maybe 5. Memory D is 3. As Jack watches from the trailer steps, Kayann slides into the Firebird and slams the door. A cigarette dangles from her meager lips. She guns the engine, pops the clutch. There’s a golden flash and veer. A cloud of dust. The blue exhaust. Memory D crying in the empty drive. The screech and groan. The gone.



“Pull over,” Jack told me. So I pulled over.

We were on a fire lane near St. George, a dirt road. 50 yards up was a Cape wedged into the woods. Tan shingles, white trim, lobster traps stacked near the deck. 5 or 6 cars parked out front. A warm yellow glow came from the windows: family, friends, a big red ham, scalloped potatoes, homemade apple sauce, lemon meringue pie, the Rose Bowl on TV.

Jack and David got out and walked down the road.

Randall turned to Novitsky, but Novitsky looked away. So, Randall found my eyes in the mirror. He didn't seem to recognize me.

"I been having a *real* bad day," he said. "Can't keep nothin' down."

Novitsky scowled. He pulled the door handle open and climbed out.

"Wha'ja have that beer for?" he asked.

"Don't know," Randall answered. Goofy. "Guess I forgot."

"Jerk," Novitsky muttered. He slammed the door and walked toward Jack and David.

Randall smiled meekly. "They're just in a bad mood."

I nodded. Another stupid white man, I thought.

Back on Indian Island when I was a boy, we'd watch

the summer tourists cross the bridge from Old Town looking for the “Injuns” they saw on television. They were always disappointed. Buck Andrews would give them his best Indian stone face. “Only Old Padjo remembers *that* stuff,” he’d tell them. Then they’d scurry down St. James Street to find Padjo. What they didn’t know was that Old Padjo could stutter painfully whenever it was convenient and made a career of putting on white people. I can still remember the glazed look in their eyes. The vacuous smiles.

The last time I saw Buck, I called him “VISTA-man.” Still feel bad about that. Full of myself, I thought he was retro. A Reservation flunky.

“Me, I’m moving to Portland,” I told him. “Got me a job with Semiconductor. When I come back, I’ll be driving a BMW, listening to hip-hop, watching DVD’s on my big screen TV. You gotta forget that Indian crap. We lost. Get over it. Technology, man. Beat them at their own game.”

“I don’t want to beat them,” Buck said. “Just want them to leave me alone.

“You’re crazy. Over the edge. Sitting in a sweat lodge while the rest of the world’s on email. You gotta get with it. The ‘GLOBAL’ village. Haven’t you heard?”



“I heard.”

“You want something, you gotta take, or they just throw you the scraps. That what you want? Reservation scraps?”

“I’ll get by.”

“I bet you will.” I shook my head. So superior. “Sooner or later, you got to choose: Niggers or Jews? That’s the choice they give us. The only one we got.” I was going to be rich. Thought I could pass. Instead, I was cleaning bedpans at Tall Pines. Wiping the old people’s asses, the spittle from their chin.

I felt bad about Buck. Wished I could see him. One good score, I’d go back and stay. Buy a house. Raise my kids where I grew up. And I knew this vet with a shitload of Oxycotin and I knew how to get it. I was hoping Jack could take it off my hands.

I watched the three down the road in the mirror. They stood in a tight little arc. Coombs, squat and squinting, feral and rat-like, rank with the smell of blood and deer meat, did most of the talking. Novitsky, tall and mulish, small-shouldered, wide-hipped, badgered David with a snotty smile. Smart-ass. Sometimes they called him “Zero.” He stood right up in David’s face. David shoved him away. But Novitsky came back.

That's when Jack hit Novitsky. He didn't look angry or anything. But he hit him. A short, straight punch with tremendous velocity. It jolted Novitsky and he collapsed to the ground. It all happened so fast, it took your breath away. I must have grunted.

"What's wrong?" Randall asked.

"Nothing," I told him.

Randall and I watched Jack and David watch Novitsky get up. He staggered to the car holding his head back, his nose bleeding and eyes already starting to swell. He piled into the back seat and began to moan. Randall pretended not to notice.

David smirked. Sniffed the air. Shrugged. Steam came from his mouth. He jammed his hands in his pockets from the cold. He shook his head. A stumpy finger fiddled with his nose.

Jack listened. He considered. . .yes. . .no. He turned and looked at Randall.

David hunched his shoulders and stamped his feet.

For a while, they didn't talk. David stared into the woods. Jack nudged a chunk of ice around in the mud and snow. Standing perpendicular to Jack, David began to talk. Jack nodded. They shook their heads together and agreed. As they walked back to the car, David cupped his hand to his mouth and said something

private to Jack. Jack leaned down to hear. They both laughed. Hard.

“What’s so funny?” Randall asked.

“Nothin’,” David answered as he climbed in next to Randall.

Jack stopped and opened the trunk. He got something out and slammed it down. When he opened the front door, he held two packages. They were wrapped in newspaper, the length of an arm.

“Turn us around,” Jack told me. “We’re going to Stone’s Point. That cove near Pig’s place.”

So I swung the big ‘98 back and forth.

“I like this Dickie Longpants,” Jack said. “He knows how to keep his mouth shut.”

Jack winked at Randall. Randall laughed. Edgy. He looked from face to face. David smiled, a shiteating grin. I watched the road for frost heaves. We all stared straight ahead.

“I wanna go home,” Novitsky said. But nobody listened. “*Home*,” he repeated, softer, sort of wistful. The others ignored him. He stared out the window at the fog and snow.

Jack turned up the radio. Metallica. Jack and David sang along. They leaned over Novitsky, shouted in his ears, taunted him: “I’m your dream/I’m your eyes/I’m

your LIFE!"

Novitsky grimaced, scrunched himself.

"Assholes," he said.

They thought it was hysterical. Did it more.

"What's going on?" Randall asked me.

"Don't know," I answered, "I'm just a dumb Indian."

They all laughed.

The music blared. David played drums up and down the front seat, up Randall's legs, across his chest to Novitsky. Novitsky, red blood turning black, sulked. He turned away. David laughed, a long hard laugh, a rooster's wild crow. Jack grinned, the fang exposed. Randall smiled. Tentative. Looking now, not so much like a young boy, but the ghost of a young boy.

Last spring, Jack and Randall tried to fixup an old Buick Randall had sitting on blocks in his front yard. All day long they ran from one junkyard to another, looking for parts. Finally, four legs splayed beneath the chassis, they worked. When everything was ready, Randall waved his arm and cried, "OK." Memory D turned it over. The engine coughed, then roared. "Hooray," they yelled, then "Ouoohah!" A ruptured brake line sprayed them both. They laughed and shouted.

Cursed. Drank more beer. Watched an amber sun go down.

I pulled the car over when we got to Stone's Point.

Randall wasn't feeling well. So David took him down by the water. I guess Randall was sick then.

While Novitsky and I sat silent, Jack unwrapped the package on his lap. It was a 12-gauge with a long stock and wavy patterns on the barrel they call Damascus Steel. Jack snapped the pieces together.

"Whatch'ya need that for?" Novitsky asked.

"Night huntin'," Jack answered, "HawHawHaw," and got out of the car.

Last Thanksgiving, Memory D made dinner. It was pretty good. Everyone said so. That afternoon, Jack and Randall got into a fight. Over a machete Randall's mother had given as a gift. Randall received cuts to his hands and face. Mrs. Pease banned Jack from her trailer for a month. Wouldn't let him step foot in her house.

"Jack's just pissed about Memory D," Novitsky told me when Jack was gone. "It's that stupid."

I nodded.

"He didn't do it," Novitsky went on.

“Do what?” I asked.

“Tell the cops.”

“I don’t want to know,” I told him.

A little before Christmas, Jack and David and Randall broke down on the Finn Town Road. A fuel pump in Randall’s flatbed Toyota. They were standing around with the hood up wondering what to do when the sheriff’s patrol came by. The deputy they called “Moleface.” He told Jack and David to wait with the truck while he took Randall to get a wrecker. Jack and David waited hours. Couldn’t figure out what took Randall so long. Three days later, “Moleface” showed up at Jack’s house with a search warrant. Possession. Pharmaceutical morphine stolen from a Brook’s in Rockland. “Don’t got to be no genius,” David said. Randall had a trial date in January. Theft by Unauthorized Taking.

“Been friends since they was kids,” Novitsky added.

“Don’t matter to me,” I told him.

“He didn’t do it!”

“How do you know?”

“I just do,” he said, uncomfortable with me staring at him. He shrunked down into his big coat.

Jack carried the shotgun by the barrel over one shoulder. He plunged down a steep embankment, then walked along the shore. I got out and followed. I went to the edge and watched them below. Their voices weren't loud but, beneath the cloud cover, carried farther than normal.

"Like this since yesterday," Randall said to David as Jack approached. "Diarrhea, too."

"Yeah," David concluded, "you got a real talent for diarrhea."

Randall bent over. He dryheaved.

When Randall stood up, he ran his hands through his hair. His hair was long and thin, moked and greasy with sweat. The hands shook. His whole body shuddered. "Ah, Jesus," he sighed and held his hands out for us to see. Watched them shake. He looked up with a guilty smile.

We were on Hornbuck. Near the Ledges. I knew this place. The Wabanakis once used it as a summer home. You could still find the piles of oyster, clam, and quahog shells they left behind. The Whaleback middens. And before them, the Red Paint People, "the children of the mists," used it for one of their ceremonials. It was an ancient place and filled with spirits.

The tide was coming in and it was bleak and cold.

The big brown rocks were matted down with seaweed and spartina. They looked like the backs of wooly elephants bunched up together in the browngreen water. The sky was pale. The color of mackerel. The eelgrass along the shore was all beatendown and broken. It was almost beautiful. And there was Jack, standing with a crackedlittlealtarboy's face and the 12-gauge over his shoulder. The silver light of a late moon rising came from behind him like the nimbus of a saint. And Randall was puking. Looking all white and horrible.

"You ought to shave that beard," he told Jack.

Randall stared at the hair growing on Jack's face. The shafts looked unreal in the muted light. Like jagged coils in the soft mist. Randall found them very curious. He tried to touch them, but Jack slapped his hand away. Randall shivered and began to laugh. He reached an arm out to Jack, palm open and upward, but Jack smacked it away.

Then David grabbed Randall.

An embrace, almost affectionate. Sexual. It was weird. The look in his eyes. His hands fondled Randall's throat. Randall drew his arms tight into his chest. He smiled uncertainly. David smiled, too. Then he put his left arm around Randall's neck in a headlock, almost a choke hold. Randall broke free. Spastic. He



pushed David away. “No, no you don’t,” he cried. Then he began to sob. He tried to walk down the beach, but had trouble getting his arms and legs to work. He began to cry. He seemed very sad.

I walked back to the car.

Novitsky had crunched himself in the corner of the back seat. So quiet I thought he was asleep. Then the window rolled down.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“Nothing,” I said.

“Maybe there’s something we should do.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know . . . *something*.”

“No, there ain’t nothin’.”

Novitsky sat silent.

“Can’t we fix it?”

“It’s between *them*,” I told him.

Novitsky crossed his arms.

“I never liked Randall, anyway,” he said.

“Now you’re talkin’.”

“Always hanging around Lena. The little squeeze. Giving her that poor-littleboy-I-can’t-takecareofmyself bullshit routine. I hate guys who do that.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Whatta’ *we* got to do with it?” he asked

“Not a thing.”

“Ain’t our fault.”

“That’s right.”

Novitsky rocked back and forth. He chewed on the hair of his lower lip.

“Asshole,” he concluded.

“Forget it.”

“Got nothin’ to do with us.”

“Don’t let it bother you.”

“They’re just gonna scare him, that’s all.”

“You got it right.”

“KABOOM!!!” shook the air. “KABOOM!!!”

There was silence. 1and2. Then blue jays squawked in oak trees behind us. Across the cove, three or four scoters fluttered into flight. A squirrel chattered. It was quiet again.

Novitsky moaned.

Jack and David sprinted up the hill. Pumped. Like players after a football game. Crazy smiles on their faces. “Let’s go,” Jack said.

Stone’s Point was a culdesac. So I had to drive down and turn around. When we passed Randall, Jack told me to pull over. Up close to the edge.

We could see him from the road.

But he didn't look "real" anymore. Randall was just a "thing." Broken. A shard of glass, a stump, a scrap of garbage. Splayed over a big rock, bellydown, buttup, head glued to the ground and blown open like a watermelon.

"Happy New Year's," Jack said.

Novitsky whimpered.

"Won't rat on us no more," Coombs snarled.

"OmigodOmigodOmigod," Novitsky kept repeating. He couldn't stop himself.

"Don't mean nothin' to me," Jack said.

"An accident," Novitsky proffered, "just an accident. . ."

"Yeah," David Coombs replied, "that he was ever born."

I slipped the shift to "D." The big Oldsmobile shuddered, then thumped into gear. We drove away slowly. Leaving Randall, folded, alone in the darkness. Before us, black trees closed the white road. At our backs, the moon, the cold, hard, implacable moon, sailed high behind ragged clouds. The hunter's moon. The moon of the long night, rising.

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Once, Charlotte Cunningham-McEachin tried to be an academic, and so she submitted to the Missouri Philological Association's journal, *PMPA* — and got-accepted. But it did not feel like acceptance. So, now she teaches on the border of Mexico at Laredo Community College, questions and combats The Patron System (perhaps to her peril), submits her-writing hesitantly and won Honorable Mention and Third Place at the 5th and 6th Annual Laredo Poetry Festivals in 2008 and 2009. She feels more accepted there than she has comfortably-felt in her whole lifetime. Her work has appeared in *Apathy is Easy*, *Gutter Eloquence Magazine*, *Verse Wisconsin*, *greatest lakes review* and *Punkin House Digest*. She received an MFA in Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts.

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[http://www.pw.org/content/roger\\_pincus](http://www.pw.org/content/roger_pincus)